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ABSTRACT

The fundamental limits of the functional approach to the study of mass communication are embodied in two of its criticisms. The first weakness is in its logical structure and the second involves the limits that are set by known methods. Functional analysis has difficulties as a meaningful research perspective because the process of mass communication is unusually complex; it does not meet the rigorous assumption of linearity in causal relationships that is essential to establishing the rules in the functional model. Functional analysis, therefore, as it applies to the operation of the mass media as a social system, is useful in only a limited sense. It gives an explanation for the major components of a system, how the information flows within the system, and how influence within and between components operates. The uses and gratifications approach can clarify some of the limitations of the functional approach, but some questions must still be answered before the utility of the uses and gratifications theory can be estimated. Functional analysis and uses and gratifications theory have explained some of the effects that can occur, but little is known about the range of uses and gratifications that do occur. Although the sociology of communication has been essentially functionalist to date, it is time to look elsewhere. (JF)

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The Limits of Functional Analysis in the Study of Mass Communication

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Definition

The conceptual diversity of functionalism has been well-documented by Davis (1959) but a review of representative positions may be useful for this symposium. For Spencer (1964; p. 1), an anthropologist, "the functional approach is at base simple; it seeks to do no more than to assay the place of a particular element of culture of societal institutions in relation to other elements." Stinchcombe (1968; p. 58) considers function explanations as those "in which a structure or an activity is caused indirectly by its consequences." Flanigan and Fogelman (1965; p. 112), on the other hand, think functionalism means merely that in analyzing some phenomena "the . . . scientist will be concerned with, among other things, the functions or purposes served by the phenomena." Systems analysis has sometimes been considered an applied form of functionalism. Brown (1970; p. 120) quotes Quade as defining a systems analysis as "an analytic study ... characterized by a systematic and rational approach [in which] alternative courses of action [are] compared in light of their possible consequences." In our own field Kline (1972; p. 26) returns to Merton (as quoted by Wright) a major source of the development of functionalism. His definition now thrice removed from the original reads: "Functional analysis, to a great extent, is concerned with examining those consequences of social phenomena which affect the normal operation, adaptation, or adjustment of a given system: individuals, subgroups, social and cultural systems." The interpretations of Merton's definition have brought us macro-functionalists (which are further divided into ideographic macro-functionalists and nomethetic macro-functionalists), micro-functionalists, empirical functionalists, eclectic functionalists, structural

functionalists and, of course, a functionalism for each of the social sciences--economic functionalism, sociological functionalism, etc. Most recently Swanson (1977; p. 218) has identified uses and gratifications research as a member of the functionalist camp, saying that "the intellectual origins...as well as the typical study are clearly functionalist." Swanson does not, however provide us with additional insight into the nature of functionalism.

We will not try to resolve this situation for as Davis (1959; p. 758) writes, "So many have tried this--notably Merton Levy, Radcliffe-Brown--without visibly improving general usage that one is forced to view the diversity itself as an essential rather than an accidental feature of the situation...."

What we will do is attempt to use the term consistently. We will dismiss the interrelationist definition as non-distinctive, avoid the teleological definition of Malinowski and further find the function-as-an-item-among-items notion perhaps reasonable but inadequate to provide the essence of functionalism. Our definition will be that of Martindale (1960; p. 465) who states:

> Functionalism reaches its distinctive subject matter when it takes the organism-like system as its peculiar object of study and conceives of this as the primary subject matter of ... analysis, studying all other items as system-determined and system-maintaining."

Criticisms

The critics and criticisms of functionalism and its variants are many: Jarvie (1965; p. 18) lists the difficulties of functionalism as "its lack of explanatory power, its unsatisfactoriness as explanation, and the constricting effect of its assumptions about the nature and workings of social systems." Davis (1959) states that functionalism is vulnerable to the charge of inverified theorizing," burdened with

"weak" terminology, "heavily deductive" and susceptible to teleological and ideological interpretations. Mills (1959; p. 49) finds the grand theory of the functionalists "about 50 per cent verbiage; 40 per cent is well-known textbook sociology. The other 10 per cent ... I am willing to leave open...." Martindale (1965; p. 143) a most productive critic, while still an apologist for functionalism notes eight "principal charges against functionalism:

> "(1) its verbal obscruity; (2) its lack of reference to objective reality; (3) its teleological overtones; (4) its faulty distinction between individual and social determinants of behavior; (5) its use of static models which do not permit analysis of change; (6) its conservatism through stressing of the functional to the exclusion of the dysfunctional; (7) its inability to prove that an activity is essential to the survival of the system; and (8) its claim to be unique in relating all social phenomena into one system of thought."

Swanson (1977) in reviewing the uses and gratifications approach finds it deficient because of a "vague conceptual framework"; "lack of precision in major concepts"; "confused explanatory apparatus" and a "failure to view perception as an active process." Finally, Anderson and Meyer (1975a and 1975b) have found the application of functionalism to the study of the mass media to be dependent on faulty definitions and inadequate data collections and insufficient theoretical framework. These writers further, describe its method as "a collection of scientific proverbs" the consequences of which are at best "snapshot research" with little predictive utility.

Many of the criticisms which are listed are of an applications nature and are more the product of a particular focus rapidly spreading through different disciplines during its phenomenal growth period of the 50's. There do appear, however, to be certain criticisms which embody the fundamental limits of the functional approach. We shall consider two: the limits due to the logical structure of functional analysis

and the limits due to known methods of practice.

Limits of Functional Analysis Due to Logical Structure

Jarvie (1965) tells us that a weakness of functional analysis is that it fails to "satisfy the demand for logical validity of the derivation" (p. 22). To demonstrate this weakness consider the following deduction (the form of which was drawn liberally from Jarvie):

Using Lasswell's functions we could write:

(x) People in all societies need to transmit their culture to the members of their society.

(Y) The mass media are the only way that that culture can be transmitted.

(C) Transmission of culture is a causally significant function of the structure--mass media.

It is not likely that our argument would be with theory (X); we would center our argument on the absurd initial condition (Y). We can readily reduce the argument by changing the initial condition statement to read:

(Y) The mass media are one way in which the culture may be transmitted.

By doing so, however, we are unable to falsify our conclusion. As a consequence the statement takes on the character of an irreducible postulate with no power of explanation.

Jarvie further argues that functional explanations fail the test of satisfactoriness (i.e. allowing the independent testing of the terms). For example, claiming that the mass media provide the requisite function of transmission of culture and that when the observation is made that culture is transmitted a test of that function is provided is a clear tautology.

Flanigan and Fogelman (1965) provide another sylogistic form of functional reasoning. Again we adapt it to the Lasswellian functions.

(X) If the mass media are to be adequately maintained under present conditions then the requisite functions of survellience, transmission of culture and correlation must be preformed.

(O) The mass media are being maintained adequately.

(C) The requisite functions are being performed.

This test lacks explanatory power because it fails to provide any evidence for the necessity of the so-called requisite functions and for the linkage between the function and the structure. What it does provide is a circular explanation for the existence of structures known to exist prior to the observations.

The other syllogistic form of the structural functional argument is as follows (again adapted from Flanigan and Fogelman):

(X) If requisite functions, survellience, transmission of culture and correlation are being performed, this will be accomplished by existing structures.

(O) Requisite functions are being performed.

(C) Requisite functions are being performed by existing structures.

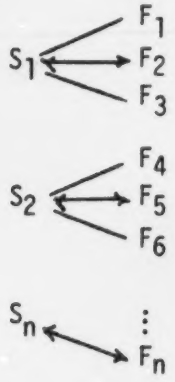
This syllogism would, of course, cause the functionalist to begin a search for the structures now known to exist. If none were found immediately, one must simply search harder. Identification of "structures" which could provide for these functions would lead to a statement of the first type which would then complete the line of reasoning. Note that only two observations are necessary to satisfy the syllogisms which Flanigan and Fogelman have developed. (1) that functions deemed requisite are being performed; and (2) that systems capable of providing for these functions are being maintained. It is our conclusion that the reasons the functional argument is based on these two observations is because structrual analysis permits only these two observations. That is to say that the inherent limit to the structural-functional line of reasoning is unverified acceptance of the notions of "requisite functions" and of "structures (i.e. organized, regularized means)" which provide them.

Consider if you will the three alternatives permissible in a structural-functional argument about the relationship between the structures and the causal functions: We can first argue from the premise that the existence of a function is sufficient and necessary for the existence of a system. This argument in turn specifies a given structure for each function. Or graphically:

$S_1 \leftrightarrow F_1$; $S_2 \leftrightarrow F_2$; ... ; $S_n \leftrightarrow F_n$ (The two headed arrow denotes a causally significant function.)

This relationship is a perfect tautology as the definition of the function includes the definition of the structure and hence provided no new explanation.

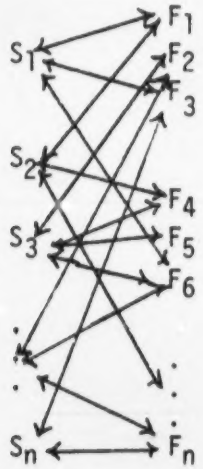
Or we might begin with the premise that a structure can provide for multiple functions but some subset of those functions is causally significant of that structure and that structure alone. Graphically that relationship can be shown as:



Clearly this is the ideal state for functional analysis. It permits the search for causally significant functions and the development of powerful theories. The useful characteristics are (1) a causal reduction of elements, (2) inhibition of the function results in the structure exhibiting retrograde atrophication, and (3) inhibition of the structure results in the function not be served for a period of transition until

a new structure is developed.

And finally we can argue that a given structure may provide several causally significant functions and that a function may motivate multiple structures. That is, the relationship between structures and functions in a social organization may have considerable causal overlap. We can display this relationship as:



While this last case seems a much more realistic notion for modern complex societies, it presents intrinsic difficulties for analysis. In the first place there is no causal reduction; i.e., there is no limit on the number of structures which may develop to serve the same function. Second there is no known method of establishing a linkage between a structure and a function: Inhibiting the function will cause no structural decay as other functions are structurally significant; inhibiting the structure will not lead to new structural development as alternate structures already exist. The crucial requirement of control is lacking in a pluristic society.

Limits Due to Known Methods

Hempel in his analysis of the logic of functionalism first considers the logical deficiencies of the functional form (an analysis from which

the Jarvie and the Flanigan and Fogelman discussions were clearly derived) and then notes two additional areas where actual functional analyses have failed to meet the general standards of scientific inquiry. He (Hempel, 1959; p. 292) identified them as "(i) inadequate specification of scope, and (ii) nonempirical use of functionalist key terms (such as 'need,' 'functional requirement,' 'adaptation' and others)."

The notion of scope, of course, establishes the pre-conditions necessary for some law-like statement (e.g. the condition of "constant pressure" for statements about the expansion of gases). If a scope defining statements such as a "normally functioning society" is inadequately defined then subsequent statements about the utility of structures cannot be empirically tested because it cannot be demonstrated that the pre-conditions were met. Thus any failure to confirm can be dismissed by arguing that the society could not have been functioning normally.

The criticism of the lack of empirical grounding of functionalist terms is one which the present authors pursued in some detail in the particular application of functional analysis to the study of the mass media (Anderson and Meyer, 1974). Without imposing those writings on you once more we can summarize by saying that functional analyses to date have (1) treated the media as if they were singular, assigning to each medium the same functions; (2) assumed that the effects of the media are direct and common to all in the mass audience; and (3) have failed to validate the functions in the subsequent behaviors of the audience.

Hempel then, among others, argues that actual functional analyses lack clarity and rigor in definition and application. It is, however, this very lack of clarity which provides functional analysis the opportunity to attack significant social operations. The lack of clarity

permits the development of persuasive arguments which disguise the formal deficiencies of analysis. As Hempel (1959; p. 296) concludes: "It remains true, therefore, even for a properly relativized version of functional analysis, that its explanatory force is rather limited.... And the predictive significance of functional analysis is practically nil...."

Perhaps a small example from a uses and gratifications approach can clarify the operations of these limits. In a study currently being conducted, Anderson has examined the reports of several hundred quarter hours of viewing from a single subject aged 10 years. The investigation is searching for patterns of viewing behavior which might signal content-bound and content-free uses of television. For this particular subject a regular entry was noted of the set being on at 3:15 and off at 3:45 for weekdays but not weekends. Channel selection varied but was more likely to be a particular one. Subsequent discussion with the child determined that the child arrived home from school at 3:10 each weekday. A snack, previously prepared, was available on the kitchen table which also held a TV set. According to the child's description, she would come home, put her "stuff away," sit down for her snack and turn on the TV "to keep me company." After the snack she would turn off the TV and talk to her mother about her day.

In a micro-functionalist way, we have identified a regular, interactive, behavioral structure of which television viewing is an element. The child has given us a "manifest function"--social contact. But this function leaves more questions than it answers. Why does the child use television for social contact when her mother is available? Why is it necessary for her to precede interpersonal contact with a media intercession? Clearly one can argue that the period is a transitional phase

from the organized, high-intensity, group activity of the classroom to the more intimate inter-personal contact with her mother. In fact we can argue that this "latent function" is the causally significant one for the televiewing structure. But what evidence can we provide from the observations we can make? The latent function is pure supposition--clever perhaps but supposition nonetheless. What if we were to intervene and examine the behavioral change? Our problem would be in interpretation, for any change can be fully explained by the intervention rather than the "need" for some consequence of media use.

It seems to us that this example identifies both the limits and the appeal of functional analysis. The appeal of the analysis is that with it we can say something significant about the element of televiewing within the context of this child's behavioral structure. The limit is that our statements are analytic rather than synthetic and therefore cannot be falsified. If they cannot be falsified they cannot be tested and verification of our theory cannot proceed.

Application of Functionalism to the Study of Mass Media

Functional analysis has difficulties as a meaningful research perspective because the process of mass communication is unusually complex and, mostly, because the process does not meet the rigorous assumption of linearity in causal relationships which is essential to establishing rules in the functional paradigm. Functional analysis, therefore, as it applies to the operation of the mass media as a social system is useful only in a limited, macro-perspective sense. It affords us an explanation for: (a) what the major components of a given system are; (b) how the information flows within the system (directionality); and (c) how influence within components and between some components operates. In this regard, we must distinguish between what influences do operate

versus may operate (or can operate); also, a distinction needs to be drawn based on influence agents impacting on the media sources of content and the subsequent audience uses, reception, and consequences of the messages.

In broadcasting, for example, we know that the Federal Communication Commission is a definite influence agent that affects stations who originate and/or distribute broadcast content. We also know that advertisers affect the kinds of content that are made available to consumers. We have, therefore, a reasonably good grasp of media source interrelationships with other components in the mass media system. We know much less, however, about what audiences do with the content and why. Research to date tells us only gross indicators of simple behaviors -- e.g., estimates of how many households are tuned in to a given television program at a given time or a given radio station in a given time period. Beyond these data, unfortunately, functional analysis and uses and gratifications research has only told us some of the effects that can occur and only under certain conditions or combination of conditions. We know very little of a systematic nature about the range of uses and gratifications that actually do occur and, most critically from a theoretical perspective of explanation and prediction, why certain uses and gratifications occur; finally, we know little about the broad, overall patterns that have any substantial value in explaining and aiding our understanding of how mediated communication works and why it works that way.

One example of the problems faced in uses and gratifications research is the often-repeated finding that some people who live alone or are alone for long periods of time use radio and/or television for vicarious companionship. Perhaps televison has replaced the dog as

"man's best friend." This finding presents a list of probing questions which beg to be answered and need to be answered before the utility of such a use and implied gratification can be estimated and before the finding can be placed in any meaningful theoretical context. Some of these questions include:

(1) While many "loners" seek electronic media companionship, many others apparently do not. Why for some and not for others? What are the personality and/or environmental variables that predict media selection for some "loners" and not for others?

(2) Why do some loners seek out radio and some television? Or, why do some opt for radio talk shows instead of music? How about those who select television quiz programs versus soap operas versus re-runs versus "The Gong Show"? What are the specific need agendas that are satisfied for different consumers, all of whom apparently share the same plight or condition of being alone or feeling alone?

(3) Does viewing television or listening to radio while alone constitute the sole reason for content seeking? Are there other needs also being served that might aid in motivating media seeking generally or a specific type of content? If yes, what are these needs? Is there a hierarchical dominance system which operates, as several researchers have suggested (Anderson and Meyer, 1974)? Multiple needs may be served by the same behavioral responses; but, searching for the necessary and sufficient causes (via the conventional linear rules of functional analysis) is an inadequate basis to account for viewing or listening because of a need for companionship. Consider the following confounding factors which can and undoubtedly do serve to complicate the process. Being alone may not mean that one is necessarily "lonely;" moreover, feeling lonely or "alone" may or may not elicit behavior to alter one's

environment. It depends on the individual, the individual's past experiences, and the conditions under which one is lonely. When one writes in solitude, by choice or usually by necessity to preserve one's sanity, a feeling of loneliness may occur, but the writer may also do absolutely nothing to alter this condition because such alterations may interfere with the sought after behavioral goal. In other words, a given need state usually is accompanied by other competitive need states, all vying for satisfaction. The dominant or primary need state in the greatest state of deprivation will be the one that is acted upon first by the individual. Being lonely, therefore, may or may not elicit media seeking behavior. Saying that some individuals do seek out media when lonely or report using media for companionship is at the same level of value for theoretical development as the finding that some people smoke cigarettes when they get nervous. Instead of examining the underlying processes that help us explain and understand how media work, research in the uses and gratifications field only adds uses and implied gratifications to a catalogue-like list and seeks to find some pattern in how the catalogue listings appear.

Measurement Problems in Uses and Gratifications Research

A major problem for uses and gratifications research has been measuring audience needs, behaviors in response to or linked to these needs, and the success of those behaviors in resolving those need states. The biggest problem of all is the lack of experience respondents have in interrogating their own causal factors which might account for or cause us to behave, think, or feel in a given manner. Most of our daily, on-going behavior including media behavior is highly ritualized and habitual; our environment has been structured to the best of our abilities to minimize unanticipated or unwanted intrusions or deviations from

set patterns.

The key problem in measuring the causes of ritualistic behavior comes about because few of us ever are called upon to answer why we do certain things. And, we are also hard pressed to be able to explain much of our behavior even when given ample time to think about it. We, quite simply, have not effectively developed and exploited our capacity to interrogate and evaluate the motives underlying our habitual behaviors. The consequences of this state of affairs are important in our assessment of uses and gratifications as a solid, theoretical approach. An inability to explain and account for motives and to understand their complexities (most behavior is, after all, multiple-motivated; and/or a single motivation may yield multiple behaviors), means that survey or inventory-type research will yield only the most superficial data.

The methodology needed requires several steps: (1) a training program must be designed to get individuals accustomed to interrogating their own motives, consequences, etc. for their various media behaviors; (2) new behavioral patterns that occur as a product of interrogation must be carefully described and analyzed; (3) given the training program and the analysis of newly created behavioral patterns, the inventory of uses and gratifications can be implemented, at first on an individual basis -- probing in depth with individuals who are experienced in the self-analysis of motives, response success, etc. Such rigourous procedures are time consuming and difficult, true, but the usual quick technique of completing several hundred telephone or household interviews asking people why they watch network television news only brings to light the need for the just-outlined procedures. How many people really have any conscious awareness (or unconscious awareness for that matter) of the myriad (potentially) of reasons that

account for their viewing of a specific type of program. The responses one gets from open-ended questions tend to be as superficial as: "to find out what's going on in the world," or some similar cliche which has little value. It seems more useful to know why the person feels it is necessary to find out what's going on in the world; if the person is really interested in what's happening in Afghanistan or Pago-Pago; why they watch television for such information; how much they remember, even from the most prominently displayed stories (recall Stern's 1971 study of the incredibly low levels of retention even in the hour just after viewers had watched the network news); how much one needs to know to have successfully "found out" what's going on. The list of questions seems endless, indeed, but seldom is such a follow-up implemented (remember, such procedures are guaranteed to mess up the neatly pre-coded questionnaire, and it is tough to train interviewers to elicit meaningful information of this type, to say nothing of the problem of quickly coding the data and having the computer neatly process the results).

It strikes us that if uses and gratifications research is to ever develop into a meaningful theoretical perspective, the "old" methods need to be shelved and newer, more appropriate and isomorphic procedures developed, tested, and implemented. At present, uses and gratifications research is counting the frequency of certain types of behavioral responses and inferring needs based on speculation or evidence derived from superficial open-ended questions or a list of items presented to the respondent which enables one to make socially desirable responses or puts new reasons or ideas into their heads which they then describe as a factor which motivates their behavior.

Final Comment

We might consider our own motives for a symposium of this nature.

It is certainly useful to clarify the issues in a discussion. But what is the end result of such a discussion. Shall we reject functionalism or shall we applaud its ascendancy as the Kuhnian pradigm of normal science. It is doubtful that either is likely. Or is this discussion a persuasive campaign to win or maintain adherents to a particular focus. The benefit of winning that debate is clear. It is much easier to do one's job if the funding agencies, editors, potential textbook adopters begin in agreement with our own theoretical Weltanschauugn. It is, however, questionable that our science is well-served by those ends. In this pre-theroetical era of our discipline, we should not limit the search for heuristic approaches to the description of communication processes and events. We need to be less concerned with precedence and more concerned with innovation; less concerned with upholding some standard and more concerned with the limits of our own approaches and the value of others. To date, the sociology of communication has been essentially functionalist in orientation. Our intent in this discussion is to "keep them honest" and to note that it is also time to look elsewhere.

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